

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method of gathering information in a social network requested by a first entity, wherein the social network includes the first entity, a second entity and a third entity, the first and second entities having a social relationship, and the second and third entities having a social relationship, wherein each of the first, second and third entities have first, second and third identity accounts, respectively, embodied on one or more computers connected in a computer network, wherein the first and second entities have an electronic contract specifying data the first and second entities have agreed to share, and the second and third entities have an electronic contract specifying data the second and third entities have agreed to share, the method comprising,
  - receiving a request for the information requested by the first entity;
  - searching for the information in response to the request; and
  - if the information is located in the second identity account, sending the information in response to the request for information if the information corresponds to the data specified in the electronic contract between the first and second entities, and if the information is located in the third identity account, sending the information in response to the request for the information if the

information corresponds to the data specified in the electronic contract between the second and third entities.

2. The method according to claim 1, wherein the second entity identifies the third entity based on a social relationship between the second and third entities.

3. The method according to claim 1, wherein if the information located in response to the request for the information is sent to the second entity, sending the information in response to the request for information to the first identity if the information corresponds to the data specified in the electronic contract between the first and second entities.

4. An apparatus for participating in a computerized social network of users, comprising:

an identity account associated with a first one of the users in the social network, the identity account having information about the first user;

an electronic contract specifying information in the identity account for sharing with a second one of the users in the social network; and

means for qualifying the information specified in the identity account to be shared with the second user based on a type of relationship between the first and second users.

5. The apparatus of claim 4, wherein the type of relationship between the first and second user is a personal relationship and the means for qualifying the information specified in the identity account qualifies the information to output to the second user information that is suitable for sharing in a personal relationship.

6. The apparatus of claim 4, wherein the type of relationship between the first and second user is a business relationship and the means for qualifying the information specified in the identity account qualifies the information to output to the second user information that is suitable for sharing in a business relationship.

7. The apparatus according to claim 4, wherein a type of the relationship is reflected in the electronic contract.

8. The apparatus according to claim 7, wherein the type of the relationship comprises at least one of person-to-person, person-to-business, person-to-organization, commercial, and business.

9. A method of obtaining information about an entity among a plurality of entities in a social network, wherein the social network includes a plurality of identity accounts associated with the plurality of entities, respectively, wherein between the plurality of identity accounts are electronic contracts, the method comprising:

requesting information related to the entity; and

receiving the requested information related to the entity based at least on a social relationship established between the entity and a second entity having an identity account.

10. The method according to claim 9, wherein the entity is one of a person, a business, a group, and an organization.

11. The method according to claim 9, wherein the relationship is based on an electronic contract between the entity and the second entity.

12. The method according to claim 9, wherein a type of the relationship is reflected in an electronic contract.

13. The method according to claim 12, wherein the type of the relationship comprises at least one of person-to-person, person-to-business, person-to-organization, commercial, and business.

14. A method of obtaining information in a social network, the social network having a plurality of identity accounts wherein each identity account of the first plurality of identity accounts is associated with an entity and wherein an exchange of information between the plurality of identity accounts is governed by electronic contracts, the method comprising:

a first identity account receiving a query from a second identity account, the exchange of information between the first identity account and second identity account being governed by an electronic contract, the query containing a request for certain information about the contents of the first identity account;

searching the first identity account for the certain information to determine if the first identity account contains the certain information;

if the first identity account contains the certain information, determining if the first identity account is permitted to exchange the certain information with the second identity account based on the electronic contract between the first identity account and the second identity account; and

sending the certain information to the second identity account if it is determined that the electronic contract so permits.

15. The method according to claim 14, wherein if in response to searching the first identity account for the certain information it is determined that the certain information is not contained in the first identity account, the first identity account queries a first plurality of identity accounts with which the first identity account has an electronic contract to exchange information;

if any of the identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts contains the certain information, determining if said any of the identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts is permitted to exchange the certain information with the first identity account based on the electronic contract between the first identity account and said any of the identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts; and

sending the certain information to the first identity account if it is determined that the electronic contract between the first identity account and said any identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts permits exchanging the certain information.

16. The method according to claim 15, wherein after searching the first identity account for the certain information, the first identity account queries a first plurality of identity accounts with which the first identity account has an electronic contract to exchange information;

if any of the identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts contains the certain information, determining if said any of the identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts is permitted to exchange the certain information with the first identity account based on the electronic contract between the first identity account and said any of the identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts; and

sending the certain information to the first identity account if it is determined that the electronic contract between the first identity account and said any identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts permits exchanging the certain information.

17. The method according to claim 15, wherein if the first identity account receives the information from said any of the identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts, the information is sent to the second identity account if it is determined if the electronic contract between the first identity account and the second identity account permits exchanging the certain information.

18. The method according to claim 16, wherein if the first identity account receives the information from said any of the identity accounts of the first plurality of identity accounts, the information is sent to the second identity

account if it is determined if the electronic contract between the first identity account and the second identity account permits exchanging the certain information.